

World War I: Battle of Megiddo

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The Battle of Megiddo was fought September 19 to October 1, 1918, during [World War I](#) (1914-1918) and was a decisive Allied victory in Palestine. After holding at [Romani](#) in August 1916, British Egyptian Expeditionary Force troops began advancing across the Sinai Peninsula. Winning minor victories at [Magdhaba](#) and Rafa, their campaign was finally halted in front of Gaza by Ottoman forces in March 1917 when General Sir Archibald Murray was unable to breakthrough the Ottoman lines. After a second attempt against the city failed, Murray was relieved and command of the EEF passed to General Sir Edmund Allenby.

A veteran of the fighting on the Western Front, including [Ypres](#) and the [Somme](#), Allenby renewed the Allied offensive in late October and shattered the enemy defenses at the Third Battle of Gaza. Rapidly advancing, he entered Jerusalem in December. Though Allenby intended to crush the Ottomans in the spring of 1918, he was quickly forced on the defensive when the bulk of his troops were reassigned to aid in defeating the German [Spring Offensives](#) on the Western Front. Holding along a line running from the Mediterranean east to the Jordan River, Allenby kept pressure on the enemy by mounting large-scale raids across the river and supporting the Arab Northern Army's operations. Guided by Emir Faisal and [Major T.E. Lawrence](#), Arab forces ranged to east where they blockaded Ma'an and attacked the Hejaz Railway.

Armies & Commanders

Allies

- General Sir Edmund Allenby
- 57,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry, 540 guns

Ottomans

- General Otto Liman von Sanders
- 32,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, 402 guns

Allenby' Plan

As the situation on in Europe stabilized that summer, he began to receive reinforcements. Refilling his ranks with largely Indian divisions, Allenby began preparations for a new offensive. Placing Lieutenant General Edward Bulfin's XXI Corps on the left along the coast, he intended for these troops to attack on an 8-mile front and break through the Ottoman lines. This done, Lieutenant General Harry Chauvel's Desert Mounted Corps would press through the gap. Surging forward, the corps was to secure passes near Mount Carmel before entering the Jezreel Valley and capturing the communication centers at Al-Afuleh and Beisan. With this done, the Ottoman Seventh and Eighth Armies would be forced to retreat east across the Jordan Valley.

To prevent such a withdrawal, Allenby intended for Lieutenant General Philip Chetwode's XX Corps to advance on XXI Corps' right to block the passes in the valley. Commencing their attack a day earlier, it was hoped that XX Corps' efforts would draw Ottoman troops east and away from XXI Corps' line of advance. Striking through the Judean Hills, Chetwode was to establish a line from Nablus to the crossing at Jis ed Damieh. As a final objective, XX Corps was also tasked with securing the Ottoman Seventh Army headquarters in Nablus.

Deception

In an effort to increase the chances of success, Allenby began employing a wide variety of deception tactics designed to convince the enemy that the main blow would fall in the Jordan Valley. These included the Anzac Mounted Division simulating the movements of an entire corps as well as limiting all westbound troop movements to after sunset. Deception efforts were aided by the fact that the Royal Air Force and Australian Flying Corps enjoyed air superiority and could prevent aerial observation of Allied troop movements. Additionally, Lawrence and the Arabs supplemented these initiatives by cutting railways to the east as well as mounting attacks around Deraa.

The Ottomans

The Ottoman defense of Palestine fell to the Yildirim Army Group. Supported by a cadre of German officers and troops, this force was led by General Erich von Falkenhayn until March 1918. In the wake of several defeats and due his willingness to exchange territory for enemy casualties, he was replaced with General Otto Liman von Sanders. Having had success in earlier campaigns, such as [Gallipoli](#), von Sanders believed that further retreats would fatally damage the Ottoman Army's morale and would encourage revolts among the populace.

Assuming command, von Sanders placed Jevad Pasha's Eighth Army along the coast with its line running inland to the Judean Hills. Mustafa Kemal Pasha's Seventh Army held a position from the Judean Hills east to the Jordan River.

While these two held the line, Mersinli Djemal Pasha's Fourth Army was assigned to the east around Amman. Short on men and unsure of where the Allied attack would come, von Sanders was forced to defend the entire front ([Map](#)). As a result, his entire reserve consisted of two German regiments and a pair of under-strength cavalry divisions.

Allenby Strikes

Commencing preliminary operations, the RAF bombed Deraa on September 16 and Arab forces attacked the around town the next day. These actions led von Sanders to send Al-Afuleh's garrison to Deraa's aid. To the west, the 53rd Division of Chetwode's corps also made some minor attacks in the hills above the Jordan. These were intended to gain positions that could command the road network behind the Ottoman lines. Shortly after midnight on September 19, Allenby began his main effort.

Around 1:00 AM, the RAF's Palestine Brigade's single Handley Page O/400 bomber struck the Ottoman headquarters at Al-Afuleh, knocking out its telephone exchange and badly disrupting communications with the front for the next two days. At 4:30 AM, British artillery commenced a brief preparatory bombardment which lasted around fifteen to twenty minutes. When the guns fell silent, XXI Corps' infantry surged forward against the Ottoman lines.

Breakthrough

Quickly overwhelming the stretched Ottomans, the British made swift gains. Along the coast, the 60th Division advanced over four miles in two and a half hours. Having opened a hole in von Sanders' front, Allenby pushed the Desert Mounted Corps through the gap while XXI Corps continued to advance and widen the breach. As the Ottomans lacked reserves, the Desert Mounted Corps rapidly advanced against light resistance and reached all of its objectives.

The attacks of September 19 effectively broke the Eighth Army and Jevad Pasha fled. By the night of September 19/20, the Desert Mounted Corps had secured the passes around Mount Carmel and were advancing onto the plain beyond. Pushing forward, British forces secured Al-Afuleh and Beisan later in the day and came close to capturing von Sanders at his Nazareth headquarters.

Allied Victory

With Eighth Army destroyed as a fighting force, Mustafa Kemal Pasha found his Seventh Army in a dangerous position. Though his troops had slowed Chetwode's advance, his flank had been turned and he lacked sufficient men

to fight the British on two fronts. As British forces had captured the railway line north to Tul Keram, Kemal was compelled to retreat east from Nablus through the Wadi Fara and into the Jordan Valley. Pulling out on the night of September 20/21, his rearguard was able to delay Chetwode's forces. During the day, the RAF spotted Kemal's column as it passed through a gorge to the east of Nablus. Relentlessly attacking, the British aircraft struck with bombs and machine guns.

This aerial assault disabled many of the Ottoman vehicles and blocked the gorge to traffic. With aircraft attacking every three minutes, the survivors of the Seventh Army abandoned their equipment and began to flee across the hills. Pressing his advantage, Allenby drove his forces forward and began to capture large numbers of enemy troops in the Jezreel Valley.

Amman

To the east, the Ottoman Fourth Army, now isolated, began an increasingly disorganized retreat north from Amman. Moving out on September 22, it was attacked by RAF aircraft and Arab forces. In an effort to halt the rout, von Sanders attempted to form a defensive line along the Jordan and Yarmuk Rivers but was dispersed by British cavalry on September 26. That same day, the Anzac Mounted Division captured Amman. Two days later, the Ottoman garrison from Ma'an, having been cut off, surrendered intact to the Anzac Mounted Division.

Aftermath

Working in conjunction with Arab forces, Allenby's troops won several minor actions as they closed on Damascus. The city fell to the Arabs on October 1. Along the coast, British forces captured Beirut seven days later. Meeting light to no resistance, Allenby directed his units north and Aleppo fell to the 5th Mounted Division and the Arabs on October 25. With their forces in complete disarray, the Ottomans made peace on October 30 when they signed the Armistice of Mudros.

In the fighting during the Battle of Megiddo, Allenby lost 782 killed, 4,179 wounded, and 382 missing. Ottoman losses are not known with certainty, however over 25,000 were captured and less than 10,000 escaped during the retreat north. One of the best planned and implemented battles of World War I, Megiddo was one of the few decisive engagements fought during the war. Ennobled after the war, Allenby took the name of the battle for his title and became First Viscount Allenby of Megiddo.

